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## Reflexivity of Modernity: Conceptualizing Modernity in Contemporary Pakistan during COVID-19

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## Reflexivity of Modernity: Conceptualizing Modernity in Contemporary Pakistan during COVID-19

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### ABSTRACT

This article utilizes Anthony Giddens' concept of 'the reflexivity of modernity' to account for the dichotomy of traditional knowledge and scientific knowledge in the Pakistani context during the outbreak of COVID-19. It analyzes the concept of reflexivity as a form of criticism of irrationality and critiques notions of certainty. This article analyzes the concept of modernity endorsed by tradition in general, and by society in particular. Modernity is a constant process of interpreting and reinterpreting tradition in the light of knowledge at any given point of time. It also argues that pre-modern society refuses to reflect upon the nature of reflection itself. Self-reflexivity is the most crucial feature of modernity. The article views Pakistan as a society where reflexivity is not a part of contemporary culture, and it struggles to accept modernity. The article argues that modernity is intrinsically sociological, and contemporary Pakistani society shows resistance to modernity. It also states that the appropriation of scientific knowledge is not made homogeneously in contemporary Pakistan during COVID-19. Pakistani society is predominantly influenced by religious discourse, which does not believe in self-reflexivity. The study will pave the way to employ the theory of reflexivity to analyze and interpret literary texts in terms of sociological perspectives.

**Keywords:** Scientific knowledge, traditional knowledge, sociological perspectives, literary text, communicative theories

### Introduction

The premise of the study is to utilize Anthony Giddens' concept of 'the reflexivity of modernity' to account for the dichotomy of traditional knowledge and scientific knowledge in the Pakistani context during the outbreak of COVID-19. The study critiques the concept of reflexivity concerning modernity as reflected in Anthony Giddens's *The Consequences of Modernity* (1996). It analyzes the concept of reflexivity instead of any form of irrationality and as an evaluation of certainty involved in knowledge. Giddens (1996) maintains that "modernity has swept us away from all traditional types of social order". The study also demonstrates that modernity theory can be employed to explore further the sociological aspects in the literary texts and contemporary world.

Giddens (1996) further states that "Reflexivity is a defining characteristic of all human action" (Giddens, 1996). Reflexivity has changed all traditional concepts which

involve modernity. The study critiques the concept of 'reflexivity' and its relation to modernity. As Giddens (1996) states that "In traditional cultures, the past is honored and symbols are valued because they contain and perpetuate the experience of generations".

The article argues that modernity is intrinsically sociological. It also demonstrates the Pakistani public's resistance toward modernity and linking it with religious, social, and cultural discourses. Contemporary Pakistan that does not believe in self-reflexivity, is predominantly influenced by religious discourse. The appropriation of scientific knowledge was not made homogeneously during the outbreak of COVID-19.

### ***Significance of the Study***

As the study analyzes contemporary Pakistan as a reflexive society in the light of the latest trends and scientific knowledge, the study will pave the way to employ the theory of reflexivity to analyze and interpret literary texts from a sociological perspective. Moreover, further studies can be conducted to explore several communicative theories to apply it to the contemporary world.

### ***Research Questions***

The study aims to explore:

- How is self-reflexivity expressed in contemporary Pakistan during COVID-19?
- How does tradition manifest through Religion and culture play its role in undermining the significance of Pakistan's scientific discourse during the outbreak of COVID-19?
- What is the relationship between modernity and self-reflexivity in the context of contemporary Pakistan during COVID-19?

### ***Research Methodology***

The research is qualitative. This article employs textual analysis as a research method in the line of argument developed by Anthony Giddens in his treatise, *The Consequences of Modernity*.

### ***Discussion and Analysis***

Tradition cannot be extinguished as its presence would be felt in modernity. Tradition is involved in all forms of social practices and attitudes in constructing the outlook of individuals. Giddens (1996) emphasizes that to "sanction a practice because it is traditional will not do; tradition can be justified, but only in the light of knowledge which is not itself authenticated by tradition. The tradition is revisited in the light of incoming knowledge, and knowledge is authenticated by tradition. This study also critiques the concept of modernity as accepted by tradition in general and society.

Modernity is a constant process of interpreting and reinterpreting tradition in the light of knowledge at any given point of time. Giddens (1996) states that "the social practices are

constantly examined and reformed in the light of incoming information about those very practices, thus constitutively altering their character". Giddens argues that pre-modern society refuses to reflect upon the nature of reflection itself. As Giddens (1996) states, "justified tradition...receives its identity only from the modern" reflexivity".

Giddens states that "tradition is not wholly static, because it has to be reinvented by each new generation as it takes over its cultural inheritance from those preceding it" (Giddens, 1996). All generations are involved in refining, renewing, and analyzing existing concepts. Giddens is of the view that tradition is not known to oral cultures. In a sense, he takes it in his book. According to Giddens (1996), oral cultures are "the most traditional of all". Giddens also hints at the role of writing in tradition as compared to oral traditions. According to him, writing assumes a privileged form. "Literacy is the monopoly of the few" (Giddens, 1996).

Giddens (1996) further says that "writing expands the level of time-space distanciation and creates a perspective of past, present, and future in which the reflexive appropriation of knowledge can be set off from designated tradition" (Giddens, 1996). It gives society a system of reviewing and revisiting knowledge as writing records events and incidents. Moreover, it also offers and introduces the "basis of system reproduction, such that thought and action are constantly refracted back upon one another" (Giddens, 1996). However, in Giddens's words, tradition is an automatic monitoring mode, a "means of handling time and space, which inserts any particular activity or experience within the continuity of past, present, and future" (Giddens, 1996). Furthermore, this is the process, which Giddens (1996) calls "reflexivity" which defines all social actions and determines the nature of human behaviors.

Self-reflexivity is an essential feature of modernity. It believes in constantly revising and reviewing the existing knowledge, whether it is scientific or traditional. Giddens (1996) says that modernity emphasizes constant questioning of "reflexively applied knowledge," and reflexivity guides that "we can never be sure that any given element of that knowledge will not be revised". He further says that "reflexivity...includes reflection upon the nature of reflection itself" (Giddens, 1996). While discussing scientific knowledge, Giddens states that "in science, nothing is certain, and nothing can be proved, even if scientific endeavors provide us with the most dependable information about the world to which we can aspire" (Giddens, 1996). Giddens continues discussing science and states that "in the heart of the world of hard science, modernity floats free" (Giddens, 1996).

Giddens (1996) believes that "no knowledge under modernity conditions is knowledge in the *old* sense, where *to know* is to be certain. This applies equally to the natural and the social sciences". Traditional and indigenous knowledge is "no more than common sense; it is closed, non-systematic, without concepts that would conform to ideas of objectivity". (Agarwal, 1995). It implies that traditional knowledge "includes the cultural traditions, values, beliefs, and worldviews of local peoples distinguished from Western scientific knowledge" (Dei, 1993: 105). Traditional knowledge has developed a concept of the environment that emphasizes the symbiotic character of humans and nature" (Mazzocchi, 2006: 463). Giddens talks of modernity about western society. Western culture celebrates scientific knowledge and supports scientific discourse ideals, which in itself is self-reflexive. Traditional knowledge is thought to be more intuitive, whereas western scientific knowledge

"favors analytical...in contrast to traditional knowledge, which is spiritual and does not make distinctions between empirical and sacred (Nakashima and Roué, 2002). During COVID-19, western societies are responding to instructions of their respective governments responsibly. They do not assemble, and social distance is maintained. They believe in the veracity of knowledge. The standard operating procedures (SOPs) are followed in true letter and spirit. People choose to do what the state asks them to do. The culture of the sub-continent is not self-reflexive. It lacks the will to review traditional knowledge. "Traditional knowledge systems do not interpret reality based on a linear conception of cause and effect" (Mazzocchi, 2006: 464). During the outbreak of COVID-19, the situation is entirely different in contemporary Pakistani society. Though the state has self-reflexive elements attached to it, the public refuses to be modern and self-reflexive. During COVID-19, people in Pakistan "do not even believe that there is anything like Coronavirus. They have the view that this is the plan or strategy of the West, and it wants to subdue and control the Muslims" (Mahar, 2020). They talk of conspiracy theories. In modernity, reflexivity becomes instrumental as it "comes from its role as the most generalized type of reflection upon modern social life". Reflexivity questions all forms of knowledge. Fallding (1991) states that "Anthony Giddens uses the structure for what is mostly called culture... comprising a depository of rules and resources only, on which people draw to organize their interaction into systems and which is both enabling and constraining".

Modernity reviews tradition, and it also shows a willingness to revisit scientific discourse. It also questions the statistics published by governments "concerning, for instance, population, marriage and divorce, crime and delinquency, and so forth, seem to provide a means of studying social life with precision" (Giddens, 1996). Giddens (1996) further explains that "Modernity is itself deeply and intrinsically sociological". Moreover, "Modernity is inherently globalizing" (Giddens, 1996). In the light of Giddens' theory, knowledge about "social life...equals greater control over our fate is false. It is (arguably) true about the physical world, but not about the universe of social events" (Giddens, 1996). Cohen (1991) states that "Giddens proposes that intimate social relations involving trust in others do not disappear, but are transformed during modernity".

Giddens also talks about the appropriation of knowledge as an important factor in reflexivity. As Giddens (1996) states that "the appropriation of knowledge does not happen homogeneously, but is often differentially available to those in power positions". Reflexivity questions knowledge. It emphasizes the idea of revisiting knowledge. It does not distinguish between knowledge claimed by the experts involving scientific discourse, and the knowledge which is thought to be traditional. Furthermore, reflexivity is linked with the ongoing process of modernity. It is "involved with the continual generating of systematic self-knowledge, does not stabilize the relation between expert knowledge and knowledge applied in lay actions" (Giddens, 1996). Franzen (1992) says that "Giddens diagnoses the present situation as modernity, not post-modernity. Post-modernity for him is a possibility beyond the institutions of modernity". Marsh (2014) states that "Globalization has its roots in the phenomena of modernization and constitutes a continuation of, rather than a break with, modernity".

Scientific discourse believes in modernity. Modernity rejects any form of servitude. Self-reflexivity challenges the notion that any discourse is a discourse of certainty. It believes

in the fact that if anything is inevitable in human life, that is uncertainty. It questions even scientific discourse as a discourse of doubt. "Discourse is always context-bound and deep understanding of various prevailing beliefs and ideologies on discourse helps in understanding discursive practices in a society" (Rashid, 2018). The study presents a picture of contemporary Pakistani society during the COVID-19. Murshed, the social media editor of Gulf News, refers to a scientific study which "indicates that the arrival of summer and rainy season in the northern hemisphere can effectively reduce the transmission of the COVID-19" (Murshed, 2020). However, it did not end even today. People in Pakistan believed that COVID-19 would end in summer. However, as an upholder of scientific discourse, the state is challenged by ever-shifting perspectives toward COVID-19, and scientific discourse fails to provide empirical evidence across the globe. In light of Giddens' theory of modernity, Pakistan does not fall under the purview of modernity.

Religious discourse is an act of faith. It is related to metaphysics. Modernity is a secular project. Religious discourse believes in God's presence in different manifestations modernity does not accept religious discourse as to be self-reflexive. Scientific discourse believes that COVID-19 is a fatal virus, whereas most contemporary Pakistani society people do not believe in it. They refuse to accept it. Janjua (2020) quotes a statement of Muneeb-ur-Rehman, a renowned Pakistan cleric regarding the state's decision of closing mosques in order to avoid the spread of virus due to mass gathering, "We can in no way close mosques ... It is not possible in any circumstances in an Islamic country". Pakistani society refuses to reflect upon the nature of reflection. Hence, it is not a modern society. Self-reflexivity is the most important feature of modernity, which believes in reviewing knowledge in all manifestations, whereas Pakistani society does not tend to question traditional and religious discourse.

Modernity is a sociological phenomenon that believes in the discontinuation of history. Modernity celebrates questioning. Modernity in itself is intrinsically sociological. For instance, it was reported in *Daily Sabah* regarding the decision of Prime Minister of Pakistan, Imran Khan, to ease lockdown during COVID-19 that "Pakistan expects to suffer an awful human cost, as the government expects millions more of its people to fall into poverty" (Reuters, 2020).

In contemporary Pakistan, though thought to be sovereign and supported by all social institutions, the state fails to make the public abide by the recommendation of experts during the COVID-19 pandemic. As Gandhara reported regarding the statement of Pakistan's Special Assistant for Health Zafar Mirza, who blamed the fresh wave of infections on the population, not adhering to social distancing. He further said, "All warnings by the government were not heard...Tens of thousands of people traveled by buses, trains, and cars to celebrate Eid in their ancestral towns over the weekend" (Gandhara, 2020). People were also discarded and avoided the instructions regarding masks, gloves, and maintaining social distance. Moreover, their behavior has been imprudent during the pandemic. "Clerics are refusing to close their mosques. Moreover, despite orders to stay at home, children continue to pack streets across Pakistan to play cricket, their parents unwilling to quarantine them in crowded homes" (Rehman et al., 2020). Religion is a sensitive issue in Pakistan. As Shahzad (2020) writes in *Reuters* about Mirza Shahzad Akbar's statement that "religion and prayers are an emotional issue for many people in Pakistan. The government has to be sensitive to that".



The people of Pakistan are uncritically critical in their approach to the scientific discourse. They show unwillingness towards modernity. Giddens' perspective on 'modernity' is western. The notions of modernity change contemporary Pakistani culture. Pakistani society is struggling to be modern, or it resists modernity. Instead of showing trust in the experts, they believe in rumors. For instance, Shah (2020) from *Arab News* writes about the spread of COVID-19 and the role of rumors in circulation on WhatsApp messages that people should not use hand sanitizers as alcohol is used as an ingredient. Moreover, Shah writes about the owner of a Beauty salon who says that "others in her neighborhood, however, are not taking the spread of the disease seriously. Only half the people in her area have barricaded themselves. The rest insist that ... whatever happens, will happen" (Shah, 2020).

Writing is a heritage of human civilization. It authenticates traditional concepts that do not change. The attitude of people toward tradition would be different for those who have a monopoly over language and those who have no access to language. "Political discourse is, beyond any doubt, characterized by representations of ideologies, power struggle, and hegemony. Politics unquestionably is a power struggle, and language is the most effective tool to exercise power." (Iqbal, 2015) People will not accept tradition for its own sake unless it is sanctioned as a practice in the present. In recent times, the tradition will not be accepted by society unless the present authenticates it. If modernity acts as a tradition, society will not accept it. Modernity is analyzed and studied at a particular moment.

The reflexivity of modern social life consists of the fact that social practices are constantly examined. If scientific knowledge changes after it is reviewed, modern societies will accept it. However, pre-modern or traditional would not allow it. Like Habermas, Giddens believes that modernity is an ongoing and unfinished project.

Modernity is a constant process of change and appropriation. Modernity believes in revisiting existing knowledge. It also believes in self-reflexivity. Self-reflexivity is a reflection upon the nature of reflection. Self-reflexivity is one of the most theoretical and sociological concepts in the discourse of modernity. In the recent pandemic, all shopping malls and markets in Pakistan were closed to prevent the virus from spreading. However, on the Eid festival, the business activity was reopened on social pressure. The government was forced to open shopping malls and markets to let people go shopping. It was reported in *The News*, "Punjab has announced that markets in the province will remain open from 9 am till 10 pm from May 21 till May 24" (Web Desk, 2020).

Tradition shows reverence to the symbols of the past. Pre-modern societies consider these symbols of the past sacred and resist all attempts to alter these symbols. Pakistan represents a pre-modern society, where the past is more significant in its relation to the present. Present regards scientific knowledge more trustworthy, whereas Pakistani people show resistance to technologically advanced knowledge celebrated by modernity. Contemporary Pakistan has a complicated relationship with modernity. It was noticed during the COVID-19 pandemic that many people in Pakistan refused to reflect upon reflections. They do not believe in the existence of coronavirus as something real. It is a project of uncertainty and doubt for them. They question the true nature and existence of something called 'coronavirus'. Furthermore, it was reported in *The News* about Fawad Chaudhri, the Federal Minister for Science and Technology, Pakistan that "according to the calendar prepared by the science ministry, this year Eid will be celebrated across the country on May

24" (Web Desk, 2020). However, in contemporary Pakistan, tradition is preferred over modernity and scientific discourse. It was reported in *The News* that "the Central Ruet-i-Hilal Committee will meet on May 23 (Saturday) in Karachi for the Shawwal moon-sighting, according to the spokesperson for the ministry of religious affairs"(Web Desk, 2020).

Knowledge is appropriated by those who hold power. And this appropriation does not take place in a homogenous fashion. Knowledge, as appropriated, may be true or false for a particular section of society. It is differentially available to those in the power position, and they can use it in sectional interest. As *The New Indian Express* stated about the Pakistani Prime Minister's decision to lift lockdown during COVID-19, "Pakistan faces the dilemma of whether to protect their people from COVID-19 or hunger as he defended his decision to ease the nationwide lockdown to save millions of people who would have starved to death due to the coronavirus-related restrictions" (*The New Indian Express*, 2020). In this scenario, Imran Khan acknowledged experts' efforts and told them that he did not doubt the veracity of their knowledge. However, he was forced to think otherwise during complete lockdown. He said that millions of people would die of hunger had he not lifted the lockdown and accepted the knowledge he had appropriated as an individual who holds authority. Moreover, it was also reported in *Human Rights Watch* by Adams regarding Prime Minister Pakistan, Imran Khan's decision to lift the lockdown in Pakistan that "Prime Minister Imran Khan has framed the pandemic response as a choice between death by starvation or death by infection" (Adams, 2020).

## Conclusion

Self-reflexivity is the most critical feature of modernity. Modernity is intrinsically sociological, and contemporary Pakistani society shows resistance to modernity and struggles to be modern. It showed that Pakistan is a pre-modern society from Anthony Giddens' theory of reflexivity of modernity in the current scenario during the outbreak of COVID-19. Pakistan came into being with a religious ideology. Moreover, religious discourse is non-reflexive discourse. Hence, contemporary Pakistan is a society that gives reverence to social, traditional, cultural, and religious knowledge compared to scientific knowledge. The meaningful dialogue is possible only "when we move away from the sterile dichotomy between indigenous and scientific knowledge" (Agrawal 2014). The paper also demonstrated that modernity is a constant process of interpreting tradition in the light of the present. Present marks a stamp of approval or disapproval on the existing tradition to accept it or reject it. Contemporary Pakistani society does not reflect upon the nature of reflection itself. Hence, it is a pre-modern society from Giddens' perspective. The article also examined the dialogic possibility between tradition and modernity that can be ensured through the reflexivity when tradition will be examined and re-examined in the light of incoming knowledge in the contemporary world. The article also demonstrated that the appropriation of knowledge in Pakistan does not function in a homogeneous fashion during COVID-19, moon-sighting, and festivals due to the influence of cultural and religious discourse.

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